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US aviator shot down over Iran recalls 'free-falling' in first interview since rescue

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Max Matza

US airman shot down over Iran recounts 'free-falling' with no parachute

A US Air Force officer has described "free-falling" to the ground with a damaged parachute after his plane was shot down over Iran, leading to a dangerous rescue operation.

"At one point when I looked up and saw no parachute, that was the most terrifying thing I've ever seen," said the aviator, who was not named in the interview with CBS News' 60 Minutes programme.

The segment, which aired on Sunday, is the first time one of the aviators involved in the April incident over Iran has spoken out about their ordeal.

The two US troops ejected from the damaged plane, were separated, and had to evade Iranian forces while they awaited rescue from US special forces.

"Free-falling is a good way to put it," said the US airman, who was identified by the name Bravo during the CBS segment.

"I wasn't focused on the speed at which I was falling. I was instead focused on trying to correct the problems that were in front of me and doing anything I could to unfurl or pull pieces of the parachute loose," he said.

He called his survival "a miracle", although he broke his back, shoulder and arm. The speed at which he hit the ground was "somewhere between 70 and 100mph (113 to 161km/h)".

The other US airman who was shot down, identified as Alpha, declined to be

interviewed by CBS.

How rescue of US airman in remote part of Iran unfolded

The $30m two-seat F-15E jet was taken down by a shoulder-fired missile, which costs around $100,000, according to CBS, the BBC's US partner network.

Bravo said that despite his injuries, he hiked and climbed to the top of a tall ridgeline, in fear of Iranian forces the whole way.

"Never let a lack of motivation put you on Iranian TV," he said.

Alpha was rescued within six hours, in an operation that involved intense fighting, said US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

"It was a gun fight all the way in and all the way out," Hegseth said. "But they got Alpha back."

Bravo was rescued after 48 hours behind enemy lines.

At one point there were over 90 US service members on the ground inside Iran, said Central Command Admiral Brad Cooper, noting that it was the first time in 46 years that American forces were operating inside Iran.

But planes and helicopters needed to evacuate became stuck in the desert sand and needed to be destroyed while special forces awaited a backup rescue crew.

A US F-15E fighter jet

Two of the destroyed US aircraft were worth about $100m each, CBS says, noting that several "Little Bird" helicopters also needed to be destroyed so the technology would not be obtained by Iran.

The operation came about five weeks into the war against Iran, which was launched by the US and Israel.

Now in its seventh month, the war has become increasingly unpopular among the US public as it heads into campaigning season ahead of the congressional midterm elections in November.

Much of this dissatisfaction stems from a steep rise in global energy prices and the knock-on effects on other goods.

Last week, US President Donald Trump predicted that the war would continue until at least election day on 3 November.

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